LATimes
6/24/91

# Oliver Stone Fights Back

■ **Movies:** His 'JFK' is still being filmed but critics are already assailing its accuracy and motives. 'This isn't history, this is moviemaking,' the director rejoins—and star Kevin Costner agrees.

By ELAINE DUTKA
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Aubrey Rike is a former funeral parlor worker, the man who, in November, 1963, put President John F. Kennedy's slain body into the casket at Parkland Hospital. Today, he's a Dallas policeman who was recently hired as a consultant on Oliver Stone's latest project "JFK"—a dramatic exploration of the assassination, which the director calls "the seminal event of our generation."

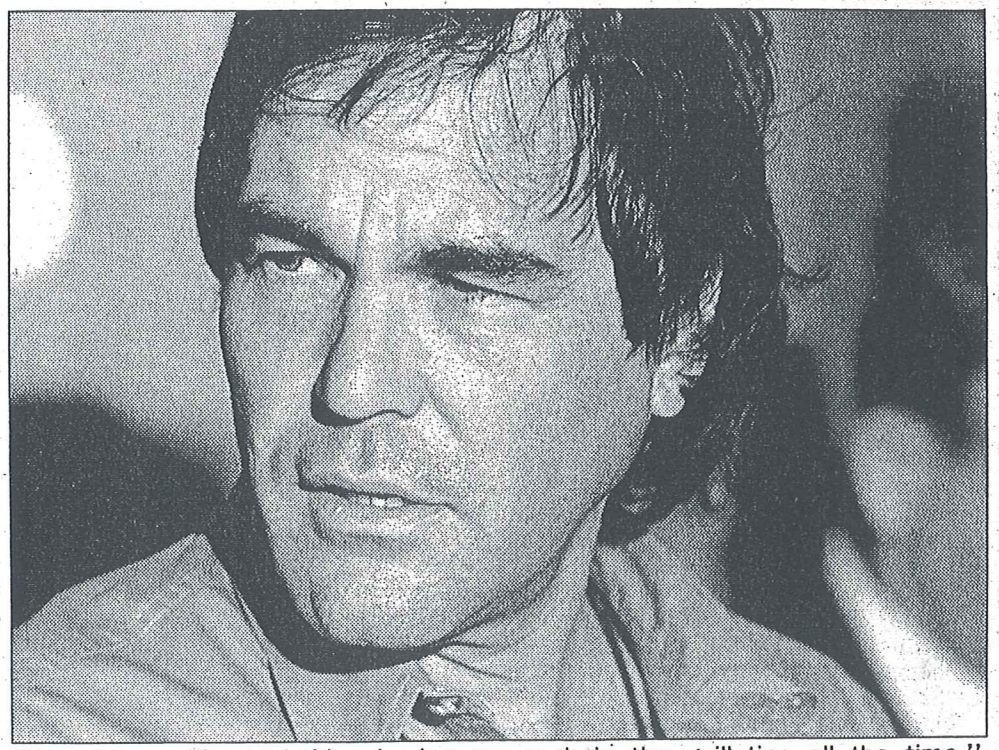
At one point, Rike recalls, he pointed out a couple of minor factual errors in the way Stone was setting up a scene: Mrs. Kennedy had not been in the emergency room at a given time; her clothes were less bloodstained.

"This isn't history, this is moviemaking," Stone pointed out. "I'm not setting out to make a documentary."

Rike ultimately conceded the director's point, but others have been more judgmental. For halfway through the film's shoot and six months before it is scheduled to be released by Warner Bros., a number of publications have condemned both "JFK" and its director.

The Chicago Tribune, Washington Post and Time magazine, basing their stories on a leaked early version of the shooting script, criticized Stone for purported factual inaccuracies, including the implication of an orchestrated *coup d'état* and cover-up. And he's been criticized for basing his

**Please see STONE, F12**



Oliver Stone: "It gets tiring having my neck in the guillotine all the time."

# STONE

**Continued from F1**

movie on former New Orleans District Atty. Jim Garrison, now a Louisiana Court of Appeals judge. The writers charge that Garrison is self-aggrandizing and unreliable, and that Stone legitimizes his investigation into President Kennedy's murder and even glorifies it through the casting of Kevin Costner as Garrison.

The controversy has thrown together believers in the Warren Commission Report and conspiracy theorists who've devoted their lives to challenging it. At issue is not only an artist's responsibility when dealing with a subject in the public domain, but the whether these critics—in the press and elsewhere—are curtailing creative freedom by prejudging a work-in-progress.

"It's interesting that the Washington Post is applauding the Soviet media for its new openness, its willingness to expose Stalin's mass murders, while impugning my project before the American people can assess it," says Stone, whose edited point-by-point rejoinder ran in the paper early this month. "It's hypocritical, a double standard, ironic at best."

Costner, dismayed at the "body blows" to which Stone is being subjected, agrees: "Oliver is one of our most prolific filmmakers," he says, "and to still his voice because people don't agree with his vision is unfair. There are people in back rooms trying to abort this movie. They're trying to trivialize Oliver and make him look cartoonish. People with the pen always have the first shot—and often their victims don't get to shoot back."

Washington Post national security issues reporter George Lardner Jr., who covered the Garrison investigation in the '60s, defends his May 19 point-by-point refutation of Stone's thesis. "I'm not denying Stone's right to be heard—just expressing my thoughts as well in the free marketplace of ideas. This subject is everyone's business. My story is a public service and if Stone were truly interested in accuracy, he should be grateful."

Responding to Stone's complaint that his critique jumped the gun, Lardner said: "If history is being distorted, I can write about it whenever I want, without waiting for a press release. I'm in the news business, not show business. Stone is just using this controversy to hype his movie."

Stone says he was informed by one Time magazine writer that three high-powered senior editors—who he alleges are anti-Garrison—weighed in when it came to putting together the June 10 story. "There's an agenda here," he says. "Let's not be naive. They're the Establishment, Doberman pinschers trained to protect the government. In my mind, no topic is sacred. This controversy is meant to kill off the film, pre-censor it and maximize negative advance impact. It's hard enough to make a film without writing letters to the editor in the 15th and 16th hours of the day. It gets tiring having my neck in the guillotine all the time."

"This piece was edited in an absolutely normal manner," Time magazine writer Richard Zoglin counters. "It got no special attention from high-level editors. For

Stone to automatically question the motives of his critics is a very feeble way of arguing his case. It is unusual to take apart a movie based on an early script but, then, this is an unusual movie. It's the first time a fictional film with a major star and a major director has re-created the assassination, it has already been found objectionable by people studying the subject for 25 years, and, in the end, people are curious."

"JFK," budgeted at $35 million to $40 million, features Sissy Spacek, Tommy Lee Jones, Ed Asner, Gary Oldman, John Candy, Donald Sutherland, Joe Pesci, Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, in addition to Costner. The part of Chief Justice Earl Warren is played by Garrison himself.

Stone spent three years digesting material on the subject and—much to the consternation of others preparing their own projects—signed a horde of witnesses and researchers to exclusive contracts. He has created composite characters from several real-life figures and events have been condensed, but anything speculative, Stone says, is identified as such and shot in sepia tones to distinguish it from the rest.

"I take a 'Rashomon' approach, showing multiple scenarios—Oswald as guilty; Oswald as innocent," Stone says. "It's an inquiry based on both fact and speculation—not 'The Jim Garrison Story,' as some have claimed. Garrison is a flawed man—full of hubris, King Lear arrogance, but in a three-hour movie, there is no time for a character portrait. Though Garrison's theories are riddled with mistakes, I admire his argument and courage. To me, he's the embodiment of the questions Americans still have on the subject and, as such, is a perfect dramatic vehicle. I cast Costner because he's a sweet person, the man of the street who smells a rat when it comes to the Warren Commission. But I'm going beyond Garrison, assembling a jigsaw puzzle of facts that have surfaced since the trial."

**'This controversy is meant to kill off the film, pre-censor it and maximize negative advance impact.'**

**OLIVER STONE**

Harrison Livingstone, co-author of the 1989 book "High Treason," which explored the assassination, isn't convinced. "I'm not against Stone," he says. "I'm not against the movie. But both Stone and Garrison are well-meaning men bringing charges without the evidence. They're trying to tell the truth, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Chicago Tribune columnist Jon Margolis called Stone a "man who sees conspiracies everywhere" and dismissed the bulk of his movies as the product of "simple-mindedness."

"There is a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant," he wrote. "Stone's

new movie proves that he has passed that point. But then, so has Time-Warner [parent company to both the film's distributor, Warner Bros. Pictures, and Time magazine], and so will anyone who pays American money to see the film."

Such attacks, says Zachary Sklar, editor of the Garrison book "On the Trail of the Assassins" and co-author with Stone of the screenplay, are patently unfair. "The great majority of Americans believe there was more than one gunman," he notes. "A congressional committee in 1979 found that Kennedy was 'probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.' Yet from Day 1, Oliver has been riding on the Titanic. Assassination buffs see him as a Johnny-come-lately who hasn't done his homework. The press is forcing him to work in a fishbowl. And giving away the thesis of his film before it's made is like giving away the ending of a mystery book in a review. It may not be illegal, but it's certainly not acceptable practice."

Stone, distressed about the circulation of "pirated scripts," had his lawyers send out letters threatening legal action against those suspected of disclosing their contents or using them in any way. "A script is a private document . . . not the Pentagon Papers," the director explains. "Who has the right to quote it out of context and review it as part of a national news story? If people want to steal something, at least let them go after the sixth draft, which is what we're shooting now."

Costner maintains that there have been substantial changes since the early days. "I've seen Oliver erase a lot of things that didn't turn out to be true, kill a lot of [scenes he was fond of] and took a long time to create. And, as an actor, I object to the press revealing plot developments, printing entire speeches. I want to perform Garrison's closing argument in its virginal form so people can be moved by it—or think it's bullshit. No one has the right to ruin this movie for others."

Carl Oglesby, a founder of the Assassination Information Bureau who's working on a "JFK" piece for the Boston Globe, says he believes that the debate—internal and external—is bound to escalate. "What we're seeing is the beginning of an enormous row on the level of popular culture," he says. "After all these years, the question of who killed John Kennedy is still a very impassioned one, and people, setting themselves up as experts, are saying that it can't be addressed from certain standpoints. But since the government, thus far, hasn't told the truth, artists have to fill in the blanks."

Robert Spiegelman, a professor of mass communications and sociology who served as a technical adviser on the Stone movie, claims there's a lot more at stake than the fate of this film. "This outcry is a continuation of the assault on the 'L-word,' the liberal values and tradition which Camelot and Kennedy—and these days Oliver Stone—symbolize," he claims, "and it constitutes a very dangerous precedent. Films critical of the official version of history aren't abundant as it is. If Stone's work can be targeted, imagine the chilling effect it can have on others without his clout and financial backing."